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The Perils of Engagement: A Space for Anthropology in the Age of Security?

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The Perils of Engagement

A Space for Anthropology in the Age of Security?

by Jonathan Spencer

In the winter of 2006–2007, British anthropologists became embroiled in a series of protests about a planned research program on “radicalisation” to be jointly funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. By linking research on so-called Islamic radicalisation to UK intelligence and UK counter-terrorism policy, the program, it was argued, posed unacceptable levels of risk to other researchers. This paper draws on the author’s role in unsuccessful attempts to mediate between the academic critics and the funders, contextualized within a fuller account of the political and ethical implications of researching issues of “security.” The paper concludes with some reflection on the hazards faced by the author’s Sri Lankan colleagues, for whom issues of security are quite simply matters of life and death.

Pnina Werbner starts off a recent provocative article with the stark question, “Can there be an engaged public anthropology of global Islamic terror?” (Werbner 2010:193). Or to put it another way, can we have an anthropology that engages with people who think in terms of “global terror” without compromising our intellectual agenda, the safety of the people we work with, our personal safety, and our ethical safeguards? This paper tells the tale of my experience as an anthropologist working with the biggest funder of social science research in the United Kingdom, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), on the development of a collaborative research program on issues of security and “radicalisation,” a program shared with people who behave as if they really do think in terms of “global terror,” the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). The research program in question generated considerable controversy from the start, and my quixotic attempt to persuade the powers that be to rethink its shape and purpose ended in resignation from the body overseeing the program’s development and further protests from the anthropological community. Parts of my story overlap with Werbner’s article, but where she expands her argument to take in issues such as the relationship between anthropology and journalism, I try to focus on the practical and political difficulties that follow from the decision to engage when the circumstances are unpropitious and the institutions you are engaging with are potentially unattractive.¹

My tale, then, is not a happy one, but one reader of an

early draft of this paper has suggested it is a very *British* tale of unhappiness. The institutional structures within which it takes place and the sheer cosiness of the relations between government, research agencies, and senior academics are peculiar to the United Kingdom. The policy issues the research was intended to address are, superficially at least, somewhat different from those raised by U.S. debates about engagement with national security agencies. Even the cultural style, the tortured institutional embarrassment that rules a simple apology out of the question, can be seen as somewhat British. Or so I am told. The issues at stake are issues of ethics and safety on the one hand, but they are also issues of engagement. Do we have a responsibility to engage in dialogue with government agencies even where we disapprove of their overt policies? Is there a danger of drifting into irrelevance if we refuse to engage?²

In the immediate aftermath of the 2007 launch of the Human Terrain System (HTS) project, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) executive board issued an important statement that, as is now well known, suggested that participants in the HTS project might well contravene the

1. There are some minor differences of chronology in Werbner’s version of the story but no substantial differences in our interpretation of what happened and what was at stake.

2. Even assessing what “really” happened in a story like this is far from straightforward. Many of the documents I used to write this paper originally reached me by e-mail; others were posted on the Web sites of different agencies. But, as I discovered late in the editing stage, these are prone to morph or disappear altogether quite quickly, the evanescent evidence thus reproducing the more general murk of the story itself. In this respect readers are cautioned to take the access dates in my footnotes quite seriously: not everything that could be found on the original dates is still retrievable.

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AAA code of ethics. There are two points in that statement that frame the problem addressed in this paper. As well as raising issues of ethics, HTS threatens the safety of other anthropologists, and the people studied by anthropologists, working outside the project. But at the very end of the statement, the board concludes that “anthropology can and in fact is obliged to help improve U.S. government policies through the widest possible circulation of anthropological understanding in the public sphere, so as to contribute to a transparent and informed development and implementation of U.S. policy by robustly democratic processes of fact-finding, debate, dialogue, and deliberation.”³ The question I would ask is this: Is it possible for anthropologists and other critical social scientists to contribute to policy making in the sort of polarized political landscape created by the Bush and Blair administrations’ contentious military adventures in Iraq and elsewhere?

A Brief History of the ESRC

The United Kingdom Economic and Social Research Council currently spends around £180 million (\$360 million) a year on social science research and training. As well as funding individual research projects, it also supports linked programs and specialist research centers. It is by far the biggest source of support for PhD students in the social sciences. It makes a very big difference to our lives. In April 2006, the total value of ESRC research projects across Britain’s 19 or so anthropology departments was £3.6 million (Mills 2006). In my own department in 2007–2008, with 15 or so full-time academics, we spent £630,000 of research income, of which £580,000 came from ESRC and its sister organization, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

Even the name “Economic and Social Research Council” tells a political tale. The United Kingdom Economic and Social Research Council was originally founded by the Labour government of the mid-1960s as the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), taking its place alongside equivalent bodies for research in medicine and the other sciences. The SSRC’s status—funded directly from the government’s science budget but ostensibly independent of political interference—is nicely summed up in an acronym from those times, QUANGO (quasi-autonomous non-governmental organization). By the 1970s, the right-wing press had QUANGOs in general and the SSRC in particular firmly in its sights. As Margaret Thatcher took control of the Conservative Party, those around her attacked the SSRC, partly for wasting public money on

obviously “frivolous” research projects. A few anthropologists were caught in the cross fire of these exchanges.⁴

Within weeks of Thatcher’s election victory in 1979, the SSRC budget was slashed as a symbolic gesture of Conservative triumph. Two years later a commission was appointed to investigate the SSRC with a view, it was widely whispered, to recommend its abolition. The SSRC survived the commission’s report, albeit by agreeing to be renamed as the ESRC (the claims to “science” in the old title apparently being too much for one of Thatcher’s ministers). In the years that followed it adapted itself to the new political climate, deliberately moving funding into empirical research (rather than speculative areas of theory) and explicitly pitching the usefulness of its research to Britain and the British economy (Spencer 2000).

In the course of these adaptations, the ESRC acquired a rather difficult, often agonistic, relationship with its academic constituency. Its forms and procedures were famously complex and often baffling. Its policy shifts, especially in graduate training, often required universities to restructure their own programs at short notice. Academics developed a substantial, often rather sullen, folklore around the actant known as the ESRC, a semi-mythological creature with known likes and dislikes, expectations, and appetites. Somewhere in all this but often forgotten by its critics, it continued to support a large amount of excellent critical social research.

The ESRC’s financial fortunes changed with the election of Tony Blair in 1997. The new government was enthusiastic about science in general and especially enthusiastic about the contribution social science could make to public policy. The ESRC’s budget doubled in the first decade of New Labour, as did the number of social researchers employed directly by central government. “Evidence-based policy” was one cliché of the moment. Another was “knowledge transfer,” the need not merely to learn new things about the world but also to be more effective in disseminating those new things to people who could go on to make something useful of them. As “knowledge transfer” was a key government concern, government departments as well as government-funded researchers were both enjoined to show commitments to linking research and practice. Not surprisingly, one of the easiest ways to set up such commitments was by linking government-funded research with different bits of government; for example, in the 2007–2008 financial year, the ESRC spent £4 million on knowledge transfer and another £7 million on joint ventures of one kind or another, including a highly successful program of research projects jointly funded with the Department for International Development.

4. The two anthropological projects I can recall being singled out for criticism around this time were John Davis’s research on Libyan politics and economy under Qaddafi and Frances Pine’s work on household and gender relations in pre-Solidarity Poland (Davis 1987:13). The greater bulk of criticism, though, was reserved for sociology, a boom subject in the expansion of British universities in the 1960s and 1970s but which was seen by the political right as a haven for Marxist propagandists.

3. American Anthropological Association Executive Board statement on the Human Terrain System Project, October 31, 2007. <http://www.aaanet.org/issues/policy-advocacy/Statement-on-HTS.cfm> (accessed March 15, 2009).

At this point I need to inject a note of positionality, for I too became a minor player in the social science boom of the Blair years. In 2001 I was invited to join one of ESRC's standing committees, the Training and Development Board. Over the next 4 years I attended countless ESRC meetings, visited a dozen or more institutions as part of ESRC teams sent to check on their graduate training arrangements, assessed applications of all sorts, and even gave a great deal of my own time to the Sisyphean task of attempting to redraft some of the ESRC's legendarily long and baffling forms.

In all this I learned quite a bit about the ESRC. Early on I had the revelation that, to paraphrase Margaret Thatcher, there is no such thing as "*the* ESRC," there were just individual men and women who made decisions on behalf of the ESRC, nearly all of them sensible and fair-minded academics acting in good faith as committee members and peer reviewers. The full-time employees of the ESRC were most often a likeable bunch—some very able indeed—but all, so far as I could tell, were trying to be responsive to the needs of the wider social science community. I did discover one unremarkable thing, that British social science, taken as a whole, is a creature of quite limited horizons. It follows that the ESRC, as a microcosm of British social science, inclines to a condition that I came to call "institutional parochialism." Like all organizations, it often turns to the same names and faces that its officers already know. Academics with experience of carrying out research beyond Europe or of working in a non-European language are relatively thinly sprinkled across ESRC's boards and committees. In the 1980s, parochialism—the contribution of any research project to the prosperity of what came to be called "UK plc" (the equivalent in the United States would be "UK, Inc.")—was an explicit policy priority. Parochialism is not a matter of quite such explicit commitment any more now that policy makers have discovered the global and ESRC has set its sights on "the international." But quite often it remains part of the habitus of those who work with and those who work for the ESRC.

Radicalisation

In October 2006 the front page of the *Times Higher Education Supplement* carried the headline "Life-Risking 'Spy' Plan Pulled." The accompanying story concerned a new research program called "Combating Terrorism by Countering Radicalisation," jointly funded by the ESRC, the AHRC, and the FCO. A series of papers for the program had been circulating on the internet in the previous week. Originally they had been e-mailed to a closed set of would-be applicants for funding from the program, but someone had forwarded them out into the world, where their arrival was met by a storm of consternation.

The specification for the program looked very strange indeed. It consisted of a very brief overview paper accompanied by 10 separate documents, each setting out either a regional or a country study. Each country or region was introduced

by a crisp financial note ("Budget: up to £100k"), followed by 20 general questions, some of which appeared in yellow highlight and bold font. In each case the general questions were followed by a handful of specific questions for the particular country, for example,

Pakistan

iv. determine the key issues concerning the general population, including analysis of local v global topics, (to indicate where PREVENT intervention strategies might have a disproportionate influence); urban v rural; political, social and economic factors; male v female; age variations; which groups (political, religious, social protest) are currently driving the main debates; the impact of globalisation; and effectiveness, availability and types of representational structures;

vii. name the key figures (moderate and extreme) and key groups (including charities and proselytizing religious groups) influencing the local population on each of the issues;

and then finally some even more specific questions:

In addition:

- assess the effect of AQ/terrorist propaganda on the wider population;
- assess the degree to which the armed forces have been radicalised;
- assess the role of madrassa as radicalising factor;
- to what extent is radicalisation caused by radicalised individuals from the Pakistani diaspora returning to Pakistan?

How best to sum up the spirit of this strange assemblage? It certainly makes very little effort to pander to the usual niceties of academic argument ("assess the effect of AQ/terrorist propaganda on the wider population"), while readers unfamiliar with the nuances of UK counter-terrorism strategy would be hard pressed to make sense of the references to "PREVENT intervention strategies" and other bits of advanced security-speak. A strange jumble of typefaces and highlighting gave the whole thing the feel of an unfinished draft while, however you look at it, the language and questions seem to come from somewhere close to the world of intelligence.

The very ineptness of the presentation invited a certain healthy derision. As one distinguished historian of the Middle East put it, "Names, organisational details, social base, contacts . . . you feel they would have asked for map co-ordinates if they could get away with it." But the way in which the documents became public suggested a more worrying agenda. The original package of documents had been sent out to an e-mail list of around 80 academics, some from security studies but most with obvious area-studies connections. They were accompanied by an invitation to one of two apparently closed "information seminars" for would-be applicants, one in Edinburgh and one in London.

Where had all this come from? An internal briefing note described the program's rationale pretty clearly:

This is a co-funded initiative with the FCO that will aim to identify the drivers facilitating radicalisation in three regions (the Gulf, Central Asia and Southeast Asia) and seven country case studies identified in the FCO PREVENT strategy and/or those regarded by the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC) as current or potential sources of terrorists and terrorism. This will both serve to assist in targeting strategy and identifying areas where terrorist support or activity is likely to increase. The project will also examine the success and failure of counter-strategies that have been deployed in the various countries to date.⁵

It quickly became clear that the program had been developed and sent out into the world without the scrutiny of any of the ESRC's various boards and committees. Not only that, it was unclear if there had been any academic input at all in preparing the program documents. This seemed a major departure from normal ESRC practice.

The papers for the program escaped from the charmed circle of the original 80 invitees around October 13, 2006. A storm of protest followed. There were a number of issues that were seen to be problematic. At one end of the spectrum, for some there should be no connection between academic research and agencies like the Foreign Office. Others thought this connection was defensible, but the link beyond this to the intelligence agencies represented at JTAC was a step too far. Specialists objected to the implicit narrative about "radicalisation" which ran through the initial call for applications, and saw the call as academically compromised in the very way the problem was framed. There was very wide agreement that the explicit link between academic research, intelligence, and counter-terrorism policy, posed serious risks of guilt by association to all the other researchers in the countries listed, whether funded by the ESRC, simply working out of UK institutions, or (like my friend Ravindranath, whose fate I discuss later in the paper) working with British researchers. A week later the *Times Higher Education Supplement* reported that "the ESRC this week delayed the project to enable further consultation as a result of serious concerns raised by academics."⁶ The same day, John Gledhill, the chair of the Association of Social Anthropologists reported to anthropology Heads of

Department that he had just been told by the chief executive of the ESRC that the programme had been "pulled."

Radicalisation: A Critical Reassessment

A few days after the apparent withdrawal of the program, I was asked by the ESRC if I would help rescue the situation by finding some way to keep the link between researchers and the FCO open without fatally upsetting the academic community. I agreed with some reluctance to get involved.

The ESRC, it quickly turned out, had not decided to "pull" the program after all. Instead, it had decided to go ahead with a bigger version of the program but one that was reconfigured in order to avert any recurrence of the earlier criticisms. Why? ESRC and AHRC, it was explained to me, had signed up to the original partnership with FCO for a number of reasons. Partnerships with government departments were good news for the research councils in general: it enabled their money to stretch further, and it won them brownie points in the eyes of the Treasury. A strategic partnership with FCO at a time when issues of security and terrorism were very high on the public agenda would be especially timely. Finally, and crucially, we were in the period immediately before one of the government's Comprehensive Spending Reviews (CSRs)—a once-every-3-years process in which all branches of government have to set out their plans for future activity and discover their allocation of resources for the next 3 years. The ESRC had done very well in previous CSRs under New Labour, but it could not afford to be seen to "let down" the FCO in such a high-profile policy area so close to the 2008 review.

The redrafting of the program specification was the work of a committee that grew as the work progressed. The first meeting was on November 28, 2006, and involved myself, the chair of ESRC's Strategic Resources Board (who had taken charge of the ESRC rescue effort), a senior ESRC staffer, and a Foreign Office researcher. A larger version of the group—with a security studies academic who was to act as director of the relaunched program, two academic representatives from AHRC programs, another ESRC board member (with a background in international relations), and John Sidel, professor of international politics at the LSE—met on December 8 and again finally on January 9, 2007. Sidel and I were the only members of the committee who had experience conducting research in the sort of places covered in the original program specification.⁷ Both Sidel and I felt that, for all the

5. According to the UK Government Intelligence Web site: "JTAC was established in 2003 as part of the development of co-ordinated arrangements for handling and disseminating intelligence in response to the international terrorist threat. It is a multi-agency unit, staffed by members of the three Agencies [MI5, MI6 and GCHQ], the Defence Intelligence Staff and representatives from other relevant departments including the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Home Office, and from the police." <http://www.intelligence.gov.uk/agencies/jtac.aspx> (accessed October 31, 2007). MI5 and MI6 are the domestic and international wings, respectively, for UK Intelligence. GCHQ is the agency that monitors communications for intelligence and protects the government's own data.

6. http://www.thes.co.uk/story.aspx?story_id=2033290 (accessed October 29, 2007).

7. Sidel had just published a monograph on religious violence in Indonesia (Sidel 2006). Of the group that worked on the redraft of the program, he was the only member with any substantial background in the study of Islamist politics. I had written intermittently over the years about political violence and about religion and politics in Sri Lanka. I had just started trying to get a better understanding of the internal dynamics of Sri Lankan Islam as part of my new project on the role of religious organizations in the conflict there, but I could hardly claim established expertise in this area.

stupidity of the original call for proposals, there were good reasons to try to keep open channels of communication between academics and policy makers, even when the academics were suspicious of the broad direction of policy. Apart from Sidel, a relative innocent in dealing with the research councils, the main criterion for inclusion on the committee seemed to be prior involvement with some other loosely related ESRC or AHRC committee or program.

Institutional parochialism was, then, a serious constraint in the redrafting work, but it was a relatively trivial constraint compared to those presented by FCO. My initial suggestion was for FCO to withdraw as far as possible from any role in commissioning the research itself, but instead to be heavily involved at the dissemination end of the program. Although fragments of this idea survived into the final specification, the basic approach was emphatically not what FCO wanted. They wanted specific answers to their specific questions (and they were clearly anxious about being associated with public events at which speakers might just possibly be less than supportive of the UK government line). The FCO contribution to the original program budget, it became clear, had been raised internally on the promise of eliciting quite specific answers to quite specific questions within a very tight time frame. The money had to be seen to be spent within the 2007–2008 financial year (or the budgets from which it was raised faced the possibility of clawback in future years). So there were two reasons for rushing the redrafting: FCO's own internal budgeting constraints, as well as the research councils' desire for their relationship with FCO to be tangible and clearly visible in time for the spending review.

The specificity of the questions asked was not the only problem with the first version of the program. As the original whistle-blowers had pointed out, the whole project seemed to be based on a set of unexamined assumptions about what the empirical problem was and how it had to be understood. The documents tell a simple story. The problem is something called "radicalisation," which is a process that happens to Muslims and which, in its causes, is more or less completely endogenous to the Muslim population. So, for example, the South Asia case studies made no reference to discrimination against Muslims, or anti-Muslim violence in India, no mention of the Kashmir problem or the BJP. Throughout the documents, Western adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan are not allowed as legitimate causes of radicalisation (but "the perception" of them might be). There is no space in that set of questions for the familiar situation in which a government or an interest group uses the specter of Jihad as camouflage for its own more narrowly instrumental experiments in domestic repression. Moreover, the structure of that document suggested a naive commitment to methodological nationalism at its battiest. One of the most striking aspects of the kind of spectacular violence the program sought to understand, as both Olivier Roy and Faisal Devji have argued, is its deterritorialized nature (Roy 2004; Devji 2005). But the FCO is in the business of nation-states, so if the FCO has desks in its

office called "Nigeria" or "India," each of these will serve as the source of their own questions, and if colonial history means no one in the office knows much about, say, francophone West Africa, so it is that those countries do not get questions of their own, whatever may be happening there.

The revised specification that was agreed in January 2007 was of course a compromise between the different interests in the committee. The original FCO shopping list of questions and countries was replaced by a much wider (and more coherent) geographical remit, with encouragement to researchers to think about transnational connections and relationships. Comparative projects were welcomed, although the attempts to extend the remit beyond Islamic radicals were less than convincing. It was made clear that the "radicalisation" narrative might be problematic and should be challenged where necessary by researchers in the design of their project. And there were several reassurances about issues of ethics and risk which Sidel and I had insisted had to be included in the specification. Early in the document it was made clear that

New primary research is welcome within the programme, subject to careful assessment of the potential risks to researchers, research subjects, and other stakeholders. However, the initiative does not seek to commission long-term in-country fieldwork in highly sensitive parts of the world.

In addition,

The Research Councils expect all applications for funding to be prepared in accordance with the ESRC Research Ethics Framework. The topics to be investigated within this programme may pose special methodological, political and ethical challenges and the Commissioning Panel will expect proposals to address these challenges explicitly. In particular it will be looking for candid assessments of possible harm or risk, and imaginative methodological responses to these assessments. Risks need to be assessed for a wide range of potential stakeholders - research subjects, researchers themselves, other governmental and non-governmental agencies, and other social researchers working in the region. There are particular risks associated with research access in certain parts of the world, and research which might threaten the long-term viability of other researchers' work in particular settings will not be funded.⁸

All that was left was the addition of a paragraph from FCO setting out its relationship to the program. The FCO paragraph arrived a few weeks after everything else had been agreed, with the warning that the text was non-negotiable. It started unpromisingly:

The FCO is committed to outstanding research in support of policy making. The FCO's interest in this initiative stems

8. ESRC "New Security Challenges: 'Radicalisation' and Violence—A Critical Reassessment. Specification," March 2007.

from the recognition that independent, high-quality research on radicalisation issues is vitally important to supporting and informing UK Counter Terrorism policy overseas. In support, in particular, of the Prevent strand of that policy,⁹ the FCO seeks to use research to increase its knowledge and understanding of the factors associated with radicalisation in those countries and regions identified as high priority.

Sidel and I immediately objected on the grounds that by explicitly making the research program part of a wider counterterrorism policy, this particular paragraph would undo all the work that had gone into the redrafting and pretty much guaranteed further objections. We were supported in this by other members of the committee. Although a few small concessions were made in the days that followed—the final version omitted reference to research “supporting” UK counterterrorism policy, and the rather creepy reference to “the Prevent strand” was expanded and fleshed out—what arrived in late January was pretty much what came out in the final specification in March.¹⁰

When the word came that the program would be launched with the FCO link to counterterrorism intact, Sidel and I formally resigned from the committee and sent one final message out to the governing council of ESRC and AHRC. In that message we concentrated on the issue of risk and the necessity to keep some visible distance between the explicit agenda of academic researchers and the agenda of the British government in counter-terrorism policy. We have never received any reply or formal acknowledgment for this message. The program was launched. The ESRC was inundated with protests from senior academic figures and from professional bodies. Research was commissioned, although key areas in the world (Europe and South Asia) were covered by non-academic research bodies (Demos and the International Crisis Group), suggesting that few established academics working in those regions had responded to the call.

Implications

Of course the big shadow of the war haunts all of this, making it hard to separate everyday infelicities from the grand designs of geopolitical conflict. One of the many depressing legacies of the neocon moment in U.S. foreign policy is the credibility

it has given to conspiracy theory as a mode of explanation.¹¹ In what follows I shall set out some of the implications—ethical, practical, intellectual and political—of the story I have attempted to tell. I shall concentrate on three clustered sets of issues. One is politics, in terms of the political justification for funding research about other people and their politics. Security would seem a powerful card to play on behalf of social scientists interested in out-of-the-way places, but can we live with the consequences of framing research in terms of security? A second is ethics, in the now conventional (but often counter-intuitive) sense of procedures, codes, and committees. My third concerns the virtue of disengagement, an academic luxury that I suggest is a source of critical purchase we take too easily for granted.

Politics

There is a longer story here. In September 2006, just before the first row blew up, the *Guardian* Education section carried a short report detailing the ways in which the research councils, and AHRC in particular, were planning to use “security” as a key issue in their bids for the next government spending round. Under the heading “Terror studies: security could open funding doors,” the article concluded

There is reason to take the government’s interest in terrorism research seriously. The research councils, more than ever, have to answer to the Treasury about the usefulness of the research they fund. A security angle may be just the crutch they need to justify parting with their sought-after cash.¹²

What are the implications for a discipline such as anthropology of such an approach? Is there a place for us in an age of security? What happens to our practice if we engage with programs, such as the radicalisation program, that essentially single out a whole segment of the population as researchable in the name of “security”? I would like to be able to say that what you get in this situation is likely to be bad anthropology, but I can sense the ghost of Evans-Pritchard shaking his head even as I say it (cf. Van der Veer 2010). From the 1920s onward, a great deal of the material support for anthropological research has been justified in terms of supporting policies—indirect rule, anti-communism—we might now feel somewhat uncomfortable with. Is “security,” as a rationale

9. For more information on the Government’s Counter-Terrorism Strategy and the Prevent strand, see <http://security.homeoffice.gov.uk/counter-terrorism-strategy/> (footnote from original).

10. The full text was found at http://www.esrc.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/opportunities/current_funding_opportunities/New_Security_Challenges.aspx?ComponentId=18575&SourcePageId=5433 (accessed November 27, 2007).

11. For a very different take on the project—one which in my view overestimates the coherence and consistency linking different interventions—see Jeremy Keenan’s commentary in *Anthropology Today* (Keenan 2007). Keenan’s central claim, that the initial ESRC-FCO call was “designed to meet the needs of [FCO’s] US ally” (2007:26) and specifically to inform interventions in the Sahara-Sahel that he documents elsewhere in his article, is puzzling when we remember that the original call made no specific mention of Islamist activity in southern Algeria and the neighboring region.

12. “Terror studies: security could open funding doors.” *Guardian*, September 5, 2006. <http://education.guardian.co.uk/egweekly/story/0,,1864526,00.html> (accessed November 5, 2007).

for funding research, any different from its Cold War predecessors?

Three points can be made here. The first is that our colleagues in international relations, political science, and to some extent development studies do not completely share our qualms, even when they share our politics. The demise of the Cold War opened the way for a new wave of so-called critical security studies, work that seeks to unmask the rhetoric of security as well as investigate the apparatus of security. A great deal of this research has been concentrated on Europe and European topics, but recently a further critical strand has appeared in development studies, a strand that questions the rhetoric of human security and so-called humanitarian interventions as modes of global governance. The first strand is identified with the Copenhagen School gathered round Ole Waever, the second with figures from development studies such as Mark Duffield (e.g., C.A.S.E. Collective 2006; Duffield 2005). But however critical these strands of research, in the end their object of study is usually the apparatus of security itself, not the men and women defined in advance as a potential problem for “security,” nor the implications of making the very process of research itself part of the apparatus of security.¹³ And it is unclear how stable the “critical” perspective is, now that a new Manichean divide has replaced the old Cold War divisions between friend and enemy.

The second point is that the use of security as a rationale for supporting research has different implications in different institutional settings. In the United States, the old Cold War programs such as Title VI—which provides much of the support for training in non-Western languages in American universities—have been around so long they have long since been “domesticated” by liberal academics (to the occasional rage and consternation of conservative critics such as Stanley Kurtz).¹⁴ Historically, Britain’s approach to funding research in the more out-of-the-way corners of the world has been less systematic and much more ad hoc. This means that resources cannot simply be routed through tried and tested conduits: instead, structures have to be created to address the real or imagined needs of the policy crowd.

Third, up to this point I have been working with a rather simple-minded idea of “engagement” and of the usefulness and potential instrumentalization of academic knowledge. If Mosse’s recent brilliant analyses of the place of “policy” in development work (Mosse 2005, 2006) expose the ways in

which the language of policy does *not* inform on-the-ground practice, so it is that many researchers have stories of the ways in which their findings, although commissioned by policy makers, were adroitly ignored if they challenged the current political orthodoxy. In this case, the main point of the project for all the participants was not what might be discovered about the world, still less the difference it would make to future policy. What mattered was opening up certain relationships and keeping those relationships alive.

Through all the tortured arguments about the “radicalisation” initiative, I was puzzled why ESRC had clung so tightly to their rather shaky relationship with FCO, even when it was clear that this was doing serious damage to their reputation in the academic community. The answer emerged little by little in late 2007 and early 2008. In November 2007 Gordon Brown made his first explicit allusion to the ESRC project in a House of Commons statement on national security. Outlining what he called a “generational challenge,” Brown promised

Building on initial roadshows of mainstream Islamic scholarship round the country, which have already attracted more than 70,000 young people, and an internet site which has reached far more, we will sponsor at home and then abroad, including for the first time in Pakistan, a series of national and local events to counter extremist propaganda. The next stage will draw upon the work commissioned by the Economic and Social Research Council, King’s College and the Royal Society for Arts on how best to deal with radicalisation at home and abroad.¹⁵

A few weeks later, it was announced that “global security” was one of four interdisciplinary research themes that were to receive huge ring-fenced budgets in the Research Councils rewards from the Comprehensive Spending Review.¹⁶ This, I realized, was the elephant in the room when we were drafting our revised program specification. It was not the FCO program itself that mattered, it was the fact that security was a theme at the very heart of the Research Councils’ bid for funding for the next 5 years. If the FCO collaboration failed on the eve of this funding decision, a much bigger plan might collapse with it. In March 2008, the government published its national security strategy document, which identified what it called a “diverse but interconnected set of threats”:

They include international terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, conflicts and failed states, pandemics, and trans-national crime. These and other threats and risks are driven by a diverse and interconnected set of underlying

13. The Prevent strategy, which aims to anticipate acts of violence by building better sources of information within local Muslim communities and which was a very new initiative at the time of the original ESRC-FCO call, has since been heavily criticized for its inherent stigmatization of all Muslims as potential terrorists (e.g., Kundnani 2009). The cack-handed logic that makes Prevent counter-productive for community relations initiatives also makes it fatal for research practices that rely on a degree of trust between researcher and researched.

14. S. Kurtz. Studying Title VI. *National Review Online*, June 16, 2003. <http://www.nationalreview.com/kurtz/kurtz061603.asp> (accessed March 16, 2009).

15. Gordon Brown “Statement on National Security.” November 14, 2007. <http://www.number10.gov.uk/output/Page13757.asp> (accessed November 27, 2007).

16. Melanie Newman, “Major Fillip for Research,” *Times Higher Education Supplement*, December 14, 2007. <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=310161> (accessed March 15, 2009).

factors, including climate change, competition for energy, poverty and poor governance, demographic changes and globalisation.¹⁷

And the Research Councils announced the details of their £113 million 10-year program on “global uncertainties” at the same time. The program was to be coordinated by ESRC and genially if rather counter-intuitively bundled “terrorism” in with “poverty” and “climate change” in a rather precise copy of the government’s security strategy themes.

Ethics

Two years before this all happened ESRC had unveiled a new set of requirements for ethical overview of the research it funds. In a characteristically weighty and characteristically prescriptive document, the ESRC Research Ethics Framework (REF) sets out some minimal procedural requirements for handling ethical issues in social research.¹⁸ At the heart of this is a committee structure for ethical review that must be adopted by all research institutions under ESRC’s remit. The FCO radicalisation row was one of the first opportunities to put the framework to the test, and ESRC was quick to point to it in their response to critics of the programme: “We have already identified some of the potential ethical issues for projects under this programme and we will be reminding institutions that they need to make sure that their ethics committees have the relevant expertise to judge projects under this initiative.”¹⁹

While this structure might be thought to provide reassurance to those concerned about the ethical implications of individual projects, it completely fails to address the question of ESRC’s own responsibilities in this area. It turns out that the ESRC Research Ethics Framework has very little to say about risk to researchers and makes no reference whatsoever to the ethical responsibilities of the ESRC itself. In the world as conceived in the ESRC REF, ESRC is not an ethical agent, and its actions have no ethical implications or effects in the world. In effect, ESRC stands completely outside its own favored machinery of ethical governance, and therefore has no sense that its own decision-making requires ethical scrutiny.

This makes perfect sense in terms of the institutional politics of the world of ethics committees, whose remit is as much to do with protecting institutions from legal challenge as it is to do with anything covered by the everyday sense of “ethics.” In this situation, invocation of the Research Ethics Framework is ESRC’s own way of saying it cannot be deemed responsible for anything that happens in the course of the program: it has required individual research organizations to

put procedures in place, and this is ESRC’s guarantee of ethically correct research practice. Structurally, this resembles the figure of sovereignty as sketched by Carl Schmitt (and more recently Giorgio Agamben): the sovereign stands outside the law, so sovereignty cannot itself be bound to the law (Agamben 1998; Schmitt 1985 [1922], 1996 [1932]). But while that might seem to get ESRC off the hook by passing responsibility down the chain to individual research organizations, what if something does indeed happen that can be traced back to a decision of ESRC’s? How can ESRC demonstrate its own non-culpability? The answer is that it cannot do this within its own structures and procedures. This became apparent as soon as we raised the question of risk to researchers after the appearance of the FCO paragraph. Sidel and I could not get anyone on the ESRC side to respond in a substantive way to this particular issue. Subsequent attempts by the professional associations to engage in dialogue on the topic of risk were similarly frustrated. Having refused to acknowledge the existence of an issue, ESRC could not talk about it without admitting their earlier refusal.

This aspect of the story should raise troublesome issues for those colleagues who believe that tighter ethical codes are the best answer to the securitization of anthropology and the other human sciences. My experience of ESRC’s own use of its Research Ethics Framework as a shield against criticism is one, but by no means the only, reason for my scepticism about those procedures which have recently been felicitously described as the “new bureaucracies of virtue” (Jacob and Riles 2007; cf. Lederman 2006). ESRC’s Research Ethics Framework, concerned as it is with the protection of institutions from external challenge, offers no assurance to those concerned about the behavior of other researchers, or about the irresponsible actions of funding agencies. Moreover a strict insistence on informed consent and the protection of the interests of research participants would make it very difficult for me to write this paper. At the first meeting I attended with representatives from ESRC and FCO, I explained that I was only able to play a role in the rescue operation if everything—all discussions, agreements, and disagreements—were frankly recorded, open, and transparent. If anything went wrong later, I wanted it to be clear who had done and said what. I regard that opening speech as a license to tell my tale now that the dust has settled, but no one has signed a consent form, and I doubt very much they would agree to participate if I had offered them that option before we started our drafting meetings. In truth I see the interests of at least some of the “research subjects,” if that is what the FCO and ESRC officials are in my story, as openly antagonistic to the interests of the community I see as the primary audience for this paper—my academic colleagues in anthropology and area studies.

The Privilege of Disengagement

Why did I ever agree to get involved? Personally, I was especially dismayed by the extraordinary clumsiness and, for

17. National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom: Security in an Interdependent World (National Security Strategy 2008:3).

18. http://www.esrc.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/opportunities/research_ethics_framework/ (accessed November 22, 2007).

19. This passage was used in a string of near-identical letters sent out from ESRC in response to objections from disciplinary associations and individual researchers.

want of a better term, stupidity of the original program. But I felt that policy makers in this area need more and better communications with academic experts, including anthropologists in some cases.²⁰ This, of course, is not quite the same thing as presenting academic researchers with shopping lists from MI5; in attempting to use academic researchers as proxy intelligence agents, or so it seemed, the danger was that academics would withdraw from all engagement with agencies such as FCO. I was also concerned that the furore might weaken what limited authority anthropology might claim as a source of insight on politics in general and political violence in particular.

Here is one story that ran parallel with my involvement in the ESRC/FCO fiasco, and partly explains these motives. In December 2006, with a small group of colleagues from Japan, Norway, and Sri Lanka, I helped organize a training workshop at the University of Peradeniya in Sri Lanka. For 2 days we worked with a group of junior and senior academic staff from three Sri Lankan institutions: Peradeniya itself, which is the oldest university in the country and which, while predominantly Sinhala Buddhist in its makeup, includes a significant number of Muslim and Tamil students; Eastern University in Batticaloa, which had just celebrated its twentieth anniversary and which is now almost entirely Tamil; and Southeastern University in Oluvil, which had split away from Eastern at the height of Tamil-Muslim tension in the East in the 1990s and which is now almost entirely Muslim. The workshop was organized as part of a new consortium project designed to encourage cooperation in social science capacity building between the three institutions and that had been set up with an explicit goal to “de-ethnicize” the country’s universities, which had become *de facto* zones of segregation in the years of civil war. Its theme was conducting social research in crisis situations.

The workshop itself was, in my view, a brilliant and heart-warming success, with groups of senior and junior researchers, from all ethnic backgrounds, working up research designs on pressing local topics. (My favorite was a proposed piece of research on the everyday experience of crossing security checkpoints in the contested areas of the East.) I was particularly pleased to welcome the Vice Chancellor of Eastern University, Professor Ravindranath, to the workshop. Ravee, as he was known to his friends, had been having a hard time recently. The campus of his university was bang in the middle

of one of the most volatile areas of the country, and in the previous 2 years, rival paramilitary factions had been competing for symbolic control of the institution.²¹ A few months earlier, someone had abducted the Dean of the Faculty of Arts. When he was released 10 days later, with a chilling message from his captors that his Vice Chancellor should resign immediately or face the consequences, the Dean promptly left his job and fled the country. Since then Ravee had also left the campus and had been trying to carry out his job from the capital, Colombo, over 100 miles away from the university itself.

A few days after the workshop, on Friday, December 15, I was traveling in a car with another academic friend, who took a series of calls on his mobile phone. These concerned Ravee’s security arrangements: my friend had been using his own contacts with senior members of the security forces to get a better sense of who they thought were behind the threats Ravee had been receiving, and he called Ravee to pass on what he had learned. Two hours later, on his way out of an academic meeting in central Colombo, Ravee disappeared. He has never been seen again.

My colleagues and I reacted as best we could to Ravee’s disappearance. Having checked with Ravee’s family, we put together a letter calling for his release and, with the aid of the internet, swiftly assembled 100 signatures from prominent academic figures across the world. Amnesty International issued a statement, as did the U.S.-based Scholars at Risk program. After a slow start, the international media caught up with the story. My colleagues from Norway and Japan made early and frequent contact with senior figures in their foreign ministries and embassies. But I found it embarrassingly difficult to get hold of anyone who could help at the British High Commission in Colombo. Eventually, after a frustrating week in which messages were not passed on and e-mails were not answered, I called my MP in his office in Edinburgh, and he promised to put an immediate call through to the FCO minister most involved with Sri Lankan issues.

I have four reasons for closing with this story. First, it reminds us of the terrible danger some of our friends and colleagues live with in trying to keep alive their universities and research institutes in the context of war and everyday terror. Visitors like myself, who can walk away from the situation when it suits, have a profound responsibility to protect those whose hospitality makes our own work possible. Second, it illustrates why those visitors might sometimes benefit from quick access to representatives of our foreign ministry. It was very striking how much better the Norwegians and Japanese seemed to be at keeping communications open between their foreign ministries and academics with local ex-

20. In his response to Werbner’s article, Robert Hefner (2010) makes the point that anthropologists in the United States did engage with the dangerous simplifications guiding foreign policy after 9/11, and while the policy remained intact, the anthropological contribution did make a difference of sorts (Hefner 2010). Charles Tripp, a distinguished scholar of Iraq, has a gloomier assessment of the impact of academic knowledge in his account of a specially arranged briefing for Tony Blair and his senior ministers on the eve of the invasion: “Blair seemed wholly uninterested in Iraq as a complex and puzzling political society, wanting confirmation merely that deposing Saddam Hussein would remove ‘evil’ from the country” (Tripp 2007:30).

21. I allude to this poisonous sociality in the closing chapter of a recent book (Spencer 2007), written just before Ravindranath was abducted. For a fuller account see Walker (2010).

pertise.²² Third, in retrospect I am struck by how unprepared and—frankly—unskilled I was in this situation. As rumours and messages came back to us in murky ways in the weeks that followed Ravee's disappearance, apparently straightforward "correct" gestures took on more worrying implications. The international publicity had rattled the group holding Ravee, we were told; they were worried that if he was released there would be yet more unwelcome attention. Before releasing him, they were said to be seeking reassurances he would leave the country and keep quiet about what had happened. In that case, had our open letter to the press, with its glittering signatories, made his situation worse? Another story, which dented the warm liberal glow that attended the success of our December workshop, was that the abductors had been excited by the evidence of Ravee's international collaborations: one motive for the abduction was to get their hands on the endless flow of kroner, yen and pounds that must be on its way to him from such well-positioned supporters. Did that mean all our efforts and plans to help build capacity in war-affected parts of the university system were only going to endanger the lives of the people we were working with?

"In the social sciences," Bourdieu (1990:1) reminds us, "the progress of knowledge presupposes progress in our knowledge of the conditions of knowledge." Indeed. In writing this paper I have deliberately tried to take on the challenge posed by Harper and Corsín-Jiménez (2005:11), who make a strong case for anthropologists to commit to "the possibility of ethical uncertainty," an uncertainty grounded in our awareness of the limits of our knowledge of any political or ethical field. If I felt I was unskilled in finding my way through this deadly situation, I felt equally unskilled in maneuvering my way in the far-from-transparent world of ESRC and FCO. The decisions I made in hindsight seem too often to be based on misapprehensions of what was at stake, of who was doing what, or of the institutional constraints within which we were operating. As such, too much emphasis on individual ethical judgment rather misses the point: judgment operates in a field that is intersubjective, saturated with the workings of power, and never based on perfect knowledge of an ethically simple situation.²³ The best we can hope for is not so much being "right" but simply being "less wrong" than the last time. Appeals to ethical codes and the other safe boundaries we generate to keep virtuous "us" safely removed from unvirtuous "them" deaden our ability to reflect on ethics as a kind of skilled practice.

Fourth and finally, Ravee's fate reminds us of the privilege of non-engagement. One of the striking features of the situation at Eastern University was the way in which local po-

litical entanglements and alignments seeped into all aspects of university life. Undoubtedly Ravee wanted his university to be "engaged" in matters of local importance and to act as a center for resources and expertise in the area. One of our first conversations had been about the way in which the big international NGOs had completely ignored local researchers and local expertise in their response to the tsunami in 2004. But to be effective, that kind of engagement is in fact premised on disengagement at another level. To be useful as a source of critical knowledge in times of political and humanitarian disaster, researchers such as Ravee had to be able to operate as far as they could outside the agonistic claims of local politics. That kind of disengagement and the freedom for critical research it affords is a privilege most researchers in the global North too easily take for granted.

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22. At that time the Norwegian special envoy to support the floundering peace process in Sri Lanka was a trained anthropologist with many years experience in applied work, Jon Hanssen-Bauer.

23. Just such a presumption of ethical simplicity lies at the heart of Scheper-Hughes's "rivetingly intemperate" (Laidlaw 2002:327, n.2) but much-cited article on the project of a "militant anthropology" (Scheper-Hughes 1995).

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